THE

ASCENSION:

A

POETICAL ESSAY.

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Os homini sublime dedit, cœlumque tueri
Jussit, et erectos ad sidera tollere vultus.

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M.DCC.LXXXI.

THIS poetical eſſay was written for Mr. SEATON's prize in the Univerſity of Cambridge, but proved unſucceſsful. The Author, however, will think himſelf amply rewarded, if, amidſt the productions of perſonal ſatire, and licentious indecency, with which the Preſs abounds at preſent, the following lines ſhall in the leaſt contribute to the maintenance and ſupport of morality and religion.

THE

ASCENSION.

POW'R all-ſufficient, thou who, by the mouth
Of thine unletter'd Servants, didſt o'erthrow
Philoſophy's high tow'ring fabrick, deign
To animate the Muſe! Without thy aid,
And hallowed grace, mute is the tuneful tongue
Of eloquence, vain all the learned ſtores
Drawn from the fruitful mines of Greece and Rome,
And poliſh'd at pale ſtudy's midnight lamp.
If thou inſpir'ſt, the nerveleſs arm is ſtrung
With ten-fold ſtrength; and through the infant frame
Invigorating puiſſance glows. If thou
Inſpir'ſt, perſuaſion hangs upon the lips

Of

Of the untutor'd babe; He in whoſe breaſt
No ray of liberal ſcience ever ſhone,
Confounds th' aſpiring ſons of letter'd pride.
See, while the heav'n-taught Delegates of Chriſt
Religion's purer oracles unfold,
Th' Athenian Sophiſt and the Roman Sage
In mute conviction own the voice of truth.
Pow'r all-ſufficient, while the ſacred Muſe
Revolves the arduous theme, O animate
Her feeble ſong, and from th' æthereal ſource,
Whence thy bleſt ſervants inſpiration drew,
Benignant miniſter cœleſtial aid!

All now perform'd, Victor o'er every foe,
On Olivet's exalted ſummit ſtood
The Prince of peace: there to his ſervants gave
This laſt command, that thro' the world, o'erwhelm'd
In mental darkneſs, and the gloomy ſhades
Of death, they ſhould diffuſe the genial beams
Of evangelic light, and, as the ſun,
Scatt'ring the vapors of the drizzly eaſt,
Pours the full flood of day, diſpel the miſts

Of error from the mind. He ſpake; and lo!
The Heav'ns divide; from th' empyrean height
A glitt'ring cloud, fretted with golden rays,
Sweeps downward through the ſky: on this enthron'd,
(As erſt the Tiſhbite in the flaming car,
Upborne by potent whirlwind) from the earth
Triumphant Chriſt aſcends. Tow'rd Heav'n amaz'd
Th' Apoſtles turn their eye; while in their breaſts
Conflicting paſſions roll; deſpair and hope,
Fear, expectation, in alternate courſe
Alarm and agitate their faith; nor long
Remain'd they doubtful; from th' angelic choir
Two white-robed Miniſters of light, in form
And outward ſemblance human, thus diſpel
Perplexing doubt: " Ye men of Galilee,
" Why ſtand ye here, in deep amazement fix'd?
" 'Tis your's, ſelected by eternal grace
" For the high office, through the Pagan world
" To ſpread the rays of truth, to diſſipate
" The gloom of ſin, and to th' enlighten'd ſoul
" Diſcloſe the path of life. Hence from your minds
" Be ev'ry fear diſpell'd! Deem him not loſt,

" Your Lord and Saviour! O'er infernal pow'r
" Triumphant Victor, to his native realms
" He re-aſcends. Again, in that dread day,
" When earth's Inhabitants before the ſeat
" Of final judgment ſtand, him ſhall ye ſee
" The Arbiter ſupreme; enthron'd in clouds,
" In full paternal majeſty array'd,
" Acknowledg'd then the univerſal Lord."
Ye ſons of men, awake! To all at large
Who tenant this terreſtrial globe, the voice,
The monitory voice of God appeals.
Th' inexorable victor Death, deſpoil'd
Of his dread ſceptre, feels his boaſted throne
E'en to it's centre ſhaken. O'er the grave
Victorious, to the ſtar-encircled ſphere
Redemption's Prince aſcendeth, now confeſt
Th' anointed progeny of Heav'n. Though Man,
By vanity's preſumptuous wing upborne,
Arraign the ſacred myſtery, it ſtands
Firm on the baſe of truth, againſt the ſhafts
Of captious Deiſm firm as is the rock,
Around whoſe ſides th' accumulated waves

Wage ineffectual war. " From Death redeem'd,
" Why did not Chriſt (the Infidel exclaims)
" Diſarm th' incredulous of doubt? Why not
" In Solyma on the convicted ſenſe
" Dart truth's reſiſtleſs ray?"---And doſt thou think,
That the obdurate heart, which ſpurn'd belief,
Tho' Nature's ſelf, check'd in her wonted courſe,
Gave evidence of Chriſt's ſupernal pow'r;
Think'ſt thou, that the proud vaunting Phariſee,
Who ſaw diſeaſe, at the commanding word,
Fly from the leprous body; ſaw the beam
Of inſtantaneous light on the dim orb
Shed viſual luſtre; who beheld the dead
From the dank manſions of the grave ariſe
To renovated life; think'ſt thou that he,
Who ſaw Meſſiah by ſuch varied marks
Diſplay'd, yet doubted, would have been confirm'd
In ſtrong belief, had Chriſt, reſcued from death,
Stood manifeſtly to the world reveal'd?
God, in his boundleſs mercy, from the realms
Of everlaſting glory, deign'd to ſend
His Son, by ſigns and wonders ratified

The gracious miſſion; ſtill th' o'erweening heart,
Warp'd by the bigotry of prejudice,
Rejects the proffer'd mercy, diſavows
Th' atteſted Delegate. Why then arraign
Unerring wiſdom? Why, with captious tongue,
Heav'n's grace traduce, becauſe it hath not giv'n
That evidence, which daring ſcepticiſm,
Deep read in ſophiſtry's bewild'ring arts,
Deems an eſſential to the Chriſtian faith?---
Hence taught to glow with pure Seraphic fire,
Beyond the bounds of this contracted world
To raiſe the raptur'd thought, and at the throne
Of God, to ſtand ſublimer candidates
For everlaſting honors, from the dream
Of vanity ariſe; ſhake off the dull,
Lethargic ſleep, which in inglorious bonds
Captives the nobler, the angelic ſenſe!
Alas! what vain imaginary dreams,
Like glaring meteors of the night to him,
Who thro' the windings of a mazy wood
Follows the devious gleam, beguile the mind!
What baſeleſs fabricks of ſublunar bliſs

Doth fancy form! To the luxuriant ſenſe
All ſplendid ſeems, enchanting and compleat;
'Anon, in unexpected clouds involv'd,
Th' ideal day is darken'd, dreadful breaks
The ſtorm of adverſe fortune; all the plans
Of bliſs, fair proſpects, which, with ev'ry charm
Imagination's flatt'ring pencil drew,
Now prove mere airy viſions of the night,
Empty as phantoms, which the madden'd brain,
When the fierce fever burns, at random frames.
Shall we, ungrateful and abandon'd ſlaves
To earth's low pleaſures, on the ſhifting ſand
Our happineſs erect, which the next tide
May ſweep from it's foundation, and o'erwhelm
In the ſurrounding waves? Shall we here fix
Our ev'ry wiſh; here, where we cannot call
One moment our's; here, where at ev'ry turn,
Th' innumerable miniſters of death,
Wide-waſting war, famine and ſpotted plague,
Diſeaſe and ſickneſs, with their Hydra train,
In ambuſh lie? Did bounteous Heav'n for this
The ſoul's internal faculties enlarge,

Awaken in the breaſt (pre-eminence
Supreme, divine!) the intellectual ray? —
View the blind wand'ring herd by inſtinct led,
Whom no ſenſations ſtrike, ſave what ariſe
From preſent pain or pleaſure! Thriftleſs Man,
Thus to the future blind, of tranſient good
Enamour'd, for a momentary joy
Loſes immortal ſubſtance; though of ſhape
Erect, ſublime, in God's own image form'd,
With inward comprehenſive pow'rs endued
Beyond the "viſible diurnal ſphere"
To ſoar, contaminating paſſions, luſt,
And ſin's foul ſtains, to the prone grov'ling beaſt
Level creation's choiceſt work: This heir
Of life and glory, for an abject toy
Forfeits the crown of never-fading bliſs. —
O for a ſpark of that æthereal flame
Which glow'd within th' Apoſtle's breaſt, what time,
Bold in the cauſe of truth, and unappall'd
By tyrant menace, the converted Saint
Diſplay'd the Chriſtian faith! Aw'd by the doom
Of that tremendous day, when guilt ſhall ſink,

Whelm'd

Whelm'd in the fiery gulph of endleſs woe,
Proud Felix trembled. To th' enlighten'd eye
Of Conſcience *, ſtern oppreſſion's ruthleſs deeds,
Extortion, foul adultery's wanton luſt,
In all their complicated guilt appear'd.
O that the Muſe could, touch'd with hallow'd fire,
Thus elevate her glowing numbers; thus,
In ſtrong ſimplicity of eloquence,
Hold up the mirror to preſuming vice!
Then ſhould her awful voice, like the dire peal
Of thunder, waken the unconſcious heart
Entranc'd in proſp'rous guilt, and from the earth
To Heav'n exalt th' illuminated ſoul.
Mark where the ſordid wretch, beneath the weight
And preſſure of decrepit age bow'd down,
From the world's eye retires; in the deep ſhades
Of night envelop'd, to the ſplendid pile
Of wealth, by long penurious toil amaſs'd,
He turns his wary ſtep. Extinct in him
Are all the finer movements of the ſoul,
Thoſe exquiſite ſenſations which exalt

* Tacitus, lib. V.

And

And purify the heart, 'twixt Man and Beaſt
Diſtinguiſhing criterions. Friendſhip's flame,
Whence ev'ry joy into the human breaſt
Flows with redoubled bleſſings, ev'ry ſtroke
Of bleak adverſity, is of its edge
Diſarm'd, ne'er found admittance here; untouch'd
By pity, and the ſympathetic warmth
Of melting charity, forth from his gate
He ſpurns the proſtrate mendicant, the child,
The out-caſt child of indigence and woe.
Obdurate wretch! Say, even here on earth,
Where thou now ſeem'ſt to fix thy reſidence
Eternal, ſay, what pleaſures canſt thou draw
From opulence? Doſt thou not ſtand abridg'd
Of ev'ry chearful relative of life;
From ſocial intercourſe cut off, of friends
Bereft, a prey to the corroding worm
Of gnawing av'rice, in the midſt of wealth
Harraſs'd by poverty's diſtracting fears,
And to the very evil thou would'ſt ſhun
Self-tortur'd victim? E'en upon the verge
Of the cold grave, to the collected ſtore,

As if a thouſand years of life remain'd,
Thou add'ſt penurious.--- Inconſiderate fool!
This night perhaps, this very night, wherein,
Proſtrate before the glitt'ring Mammon, thou
Ador'ſt the golden ſhrine, avenging wrath,
As erſt on Iſraël's revolting ſons,
What time before the molten calf they bow'd
The knee idolatrous, deſtruction fell,
And thinn'd th' Apoſtate tribes; this very night,
Great as thou deem'ſt thyſelf, avenging wrath
May interdict thy joys, annihilate
Thy bliſsful ſchemes, and doom thee to the grave.

Turn we from hence to Fame's embattled plains!
The plumed Hero, by ambition fir'd,
When adverſe legions, mid'ſt the ſhock of arms,
In bloody conflict meet, thro' the dread field
Purſues the phantom Honor; tho' around
The groans of dying thouſands pierce his ear,
Tho' ev'ry death diſſolve the deareſt ties,
Leave a defenceleſs wife an out-caſt prey
To ruin, or conſign an infant race,

Diveſted of their ſole ſupport, to want,
To the wild outrage of a cruel world,
Where innocence unſhelter'd ſeeks in vain
A faithful Patron: ſteel'd againſt the claims
Of gentle mercy, thro' the marſhall'd files
Th' impatient Hero ruſhes, from the graſp
Of danger wreſts the honorable prize.—
What prize, what triumph? To the welt'ring crouds,
If calm reflection, now when war hath ſheath'd
It's reeking blade, allow a moment's pauſe,
Back to the ſcene of ſlaughter turn thine eye!
There view what fell deſtruction and diſtreſs,
What complicated havock the dire rage
Of mad ambition hath in one ſhort hour
Produc'd! Though thron'd in trophied car thou ride,
And drawn by captive Princes, while around
The adulating ſhouts of millions hail
Thy memorable deeds, paſs but a few,
Few fleeting years, the gorgeous ſcene of pride
For ever cloſes. To the ſilent grave,
Exalted as thou art, thou muſt deſcend,
Corruption's prey, vile food for loathſome worms.

Say,

Say, what will then remain, by which thy rank
And grandeur may be aſcertain'd? What marks
To point thee out from th' undiſtinguiſh'd herd,
Who in the gloomy manſions of the dead
Around thee lie? None, ſave external pomp,
Sepulchral honors, obſequies, which wealth
Can laviſh on the putrified remains
Of ev'ry villain. Th' animated buſt,
Or monumental urn, on ev'ry ſide
Rich with th' emblazonry of war, may deck
The ſculptur'd marble; proſtituted Bards,
Culling each pompous, honorable phraſe,
Swell thy proud titles, and th' Hiſtoric page
In glory's martial records may arrange
Thy great atchievements: Wilt thou then perceive
The high diſtinction? To th' unconſcious tomb
Vain is the incenſe of recorded praiſe.

Here let us ſtop, nor further urge the theme
Of human folly; for alas! what words
Can paint the monſter, the dark fiend of ſin,
In all it's varied ſhapes? Who can unfold

The num'rous paths and labyrinths of vice?
The ſands as ſoon upon the ſea-worn beach,
As ſoon the motes, which, when fierce Sirius ſheds
His baneful heat, float in the noon-tide beams,
Thou may'ſt pretend to number, as to tell
The thouſand, and ten thouſand diff'rent ways,
In which Apoſtate Man from the great law
Revolts. But O! if Heav'n be worth a wiſh,
Glory uncircumſcrib'd, and happineſs
Perennial, be a prize which wiſdom deems
Of higheſt import, ſhall we ſlumber here
Inactive, nor to the æthereal crown,
Our proffer'd heritage, in thought aſcend?
Didſt thou, bleſt Lord of everlaſting life,
From thy cœleſtial throne, to this abode
Of wretchedneſs and guilt, deſcend? Didſt thou
To inſult, poverty, contemptuous ſcorn,
To all the varied wrongs, which tyrant force,
And the fell zeal of Bigots could inflict,
Submit thy patient head? Though arm'd with pow'r
To call from Heav'n exterminating hoſts,
Or whelm the guilty in avenging fire,

Didſt

Didſt thou, while Infidels around the croſs
Malignant triumph'd, ſhed thy hallow'd blood,
Nor in the agonizing pangs of death
Breathe forth the fainteſt murmur of revenge?
Didſt thou, bleſt Lord of everlaſting life,
This complicated load of woe ſuſtain,
That Man, triumphant o'er the dreary grave,
To life and immortality might riſe?
And ſhall we then, forgetful whence we draw
Thoſe various bleſſings, which, around us ſpread,
Strew comfort in the vale of life; ſhall we,
Forgetful who redeem'd the forfeit ſoul,
Withhold the tribute of devout reſpect?
Ingrate forgetfulneſs! Each coming day,
And each revolving hour, augments the debt;
Yet ſtill we live as if eternal here,
And death and judgment were ideal terms,
The mere ſuggeſtions of diſtemper'd minds.
O ye, whoſe ardent wiſhes and deſires
To this vain world, as to a centre fix'd,
Immoveable, converge, one moment ſnatch
From folly's giddy circle; on redemption pauſe!

Howe'er abſorb'd in the luxurious dream
Of earthly joy, year after year ye loſe
In pleaſure's faſhionable round; howe'er,
While the young blood within the ſwelling veins
Beats high, ye ſpurn religion, nor extend
A thought beyond the preſent; the dread hour
Perhaps may come, when Death, with certain ſtep
Advancing, ſhall to the diſtracted mind
Futurity's tremendous ſcene diſcloſe.
Stretch'd on his bed with agonizing pain,
The trembling Sinner lies; in dire array
Crowds on his tortur'd mem'ry ev'ry act
Immoral, ev'ry deed, wherein he ſwerv'd
From virtue's hallow'd precepts. Tho' diſeaſe,
And preying ſickneſs writhe his languid frame,
All patience would he be to their aſſault,
All patience, even though the tyrant Death
Shook the uplifted dart, were conſcience calm,
Tranquil, and unappall'd within: She wakes
Her train of ſcorpion terrors, anguiſh, fear,
And black deſpair; backward to life's paſt term
She points: onward to judgment's ſolemn doom.

Th' infernal gulph, and never-dying flames,
Iniquity's award, which erſt were deem'd
(When diſſolute feſtivity fill'd high
The ſparkling bowl with choiceſt ſweets; when mirth
And blooming health crown'd the voluptuous board)
Viſions of Superſtition's gloomy ſhades,
Scare the perturbed ſoul. Incredulous doubt,
Earth-born conjectures, ſophiſtry's ſurmiſe,
All the auxiliaries of impious wit,
Which infidelity's prolific brain
Could muſter, at the touch of death's dread dart,
Vaniſh, and into nothing ſink. Before
Th' emerging Sun of truth the empty clouds
Fly diverſe, and to the corrected ſenſe
Guilt's doom in awful characters appears.—
Pleas'd with the retroſpect of former days,
Undaunted and ſerene, the good Man waits
Approaching diſſolution: On a rock,
Whoſe ſolid baſis neither raging winds,
Nor the ſwoln deluge of deſcending rains,
Nor the tumultuous force of warring floods
Can ſhake, his faith and better hopes are fix'd.

Howe'er

Howe'er up the ſteep hill of life, beſet
With dangers and diſtreſs, he may have wound
In indigence and toil his arduous way;
Tho' adverſe fortune, uniform in ills,
Pour'd down on his unſhelter'd head it's ſtores
Of direſt vengeance, to the very lips
With tears of anguiſh fill'd th' embitter'd cup,
The conflict now is paſt. And, as of old,
The Victor, mid'ſt th' applauding ſhouts of Greece,
With rapid wheels paſſing the nether goal,
Felt all his painful toil in the green wreath
Amply repaid. So at the goal of life,
(But O! what words can of the dawning bliſs
Pourtray fit ſemblance?) the expiring Saint,
Chear'd by the hope of Heav'n's approving love,
Blots from his mind all ſenſe of troubles paſt:
In bleſt anticipation rapt, thro' th' eye
Of faith, he ſees unfolded to his view
Treaſures of endleſs joy. Death ſeems to him
The dawn of life, it comes a grateful friend,
A guardian Angel who emancipates
The ſoul from miſery's enthralling chains,

And

And leads to thoſe abodes, where ev'ry tear
Which ſtream'd from Sorrow's eye ſhall be forgot.

The world, with all it's ſplendid glories deck'd,
And all it's boaſted joys, is but a cloud,
Which the ſun ſkirts with unſubſtantial gold;
Anon the winds impetuous blow, before
Th' aſſailing blaſt, the glitt'ring ſcene diſſolves,
Nor leaves the fainteſt veſtige in the ſky,
To mark the place where it's effulgence ſtream'd.
And ſhall we, for this momentary ſhade,
This poor enjoyment of an empty dream,
The faireſt hope abandon, which e'er bloom'd
In the world's deſart vale; the brighteſt ſtar
Which ever roſe amidſt the ſtorms of life,
Securely thro' the agitated waves
To guide the ſhatter'd veſſel into port?
Deluded mortals, your eccentric thoughts
Towards redemption turn! On that firm baſe
Felicity's immortal pillars ſtand;
Nor can conſpiring malice, or the arts
Of Tartarus' infernal Pow'rs, ſubvert

The hallow'd edifice. In the foul ſtreams
Of vice men plunge, by ſocial ties unmov'd,
By penal fears unaw'd. Hypocriſy,
Within revengeful, arrogant, ambitious,
To the world's eye humility itſelf,
All patience, meekneſs, and contentment ſeems.
But O! in that dread day, when mortal pride,
All monuments of regal grandeur, ſtates,
And empires, yea, th' extended globe itſelf,
Shall paſs away, and into nothing ſink,
Wrapt in devouring flames; when from the earth,
And from the boſom of the ſea conven'd,
Adam's reanimated offspring ſtand
Before the ſacred throne, what art will ſhroud
Internal guilt? What viſor then will ſerve,
Hypocriſy, to veil thy tainted heart?
Lo! in th' unperiſhable regiſters
Each latent act is noted, not a wiſh,
Which the ſoul, vers'd in intricate deceit,
E'er felt for private int'reſt; not a thought,
Which, fram'd in ſecreſy's profoundeſt ſhades,
E'er ſwerv'd from virtue's holy law, eſcapes

Th'

Th' all-piercing eye; unbounded knowledge ſees
Each darker crime, and (O vain mortals, hear,
Deep on the tablet of the heart infix
The ſolemn truth!) thus the great Judge awards
The final doom: "Hence to the drear abyſs,
"Infernal horrors! Hence rebellious crew,
"Sentenc'd to torture, where the penal fire
"Flames unremitted, where the preying worm
"Of grief and rending anguiſh never dies.
"But come, ye faithful, and elected few,
"Who plac'd within a world, where proſp'rous vice
"Exalted ſat, with ev'ry pleaſure crown'd,
"Which to the pamper'd and voluptuous ſenſe
"Could miniſter delight; a world, wherein
"Stern perſecution, by the pow'r of Kings
"Supported, bared her vengeful arm, and ſtalk'd
"In blood; where death, in ev'ry ruthleſs ſhape
"The ſubtle art of malice could deviſe,
"Menac'd the ſons of virtue; ye who ſtood
"Amidſt ſuch ſtrong temptations unſeduc'd,
"Midſt ſuch aſſailing terrors unappall'd
"By coward fear, come, ye elected few,

" To the bleſt realms, the heritage of faith
" And piety aſcend! There with the hoſt
" Angelic, Spirits from the odious ſtains
" Of foul iniquity exempt, enjoy
" The perfect treaſures of immortal bliſs;
" Hope's fair expectance, faith's reſplendent crown."

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